

*The Witch Mark: Hocus Pocus or Evidence for a 17th
Century Epidemic of Lyme Disease?*

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In his eloquently written book *The Biography of a Germ*, Arno Karlen mused about the bacteria *Borrelia burgdorferi* that causes Lyme disease. He wrote “it is understandable that people failed for a while to identify Lyme disease in all its complexity, but...the bull’s-eye rash of its first phase is hard to miss. If Americans did not notice it before the 1970’s, perhaps it wasn’t here.”[1] Recent genome studies of the *Borrelia burgdorferi* bacteria in America have found that indeed it was circulating in North America before colonial times, was nearly eradicated by the deforestation associated with the spread of agriculture, and then roared back during the twentieth century. Researchers analyzed mutations in the genome of the bacterium that allowed them to trace the evolutionary path that it took. They found ancestral variations in genetic sequences that suggest it originated in the Northeast and then spread to the Midwest. The Ixodes tick that carries and spreads Lyme disease has been around for millennia. The oldest known case of Lyme disease was found by researchers in the DNA of the five thousand year old ice mummy known as Otzi.[2]

A red circular bull’s eye rash is considered to be a marker for Lyme disease. Anywhere from fifty to eighty percent (depending on which study you cite) of those who are bitten by infected Ixodes deer ticks develop the bull’s eye rash at the site of the tick bite. A tick secretes a numbing substance found in its’ saliva prior to attaching and sucking blood during a meal. This process transfers the Lyme bacteria and can generate a rash. This rash may be shaped like a ring, a triangle, an oval or a long thin ragged line and can be hot to the touch, itchy, burning or painful. Alternatively, the skin at the site can be numb. In Europe, the rash can take the form of a lymphocytoma—a raised bluish red spot. [3]

Did this rash appear in the past? The answer to Arno Karlen’s quandary is that the bull’s eye rash **was** noticed for centuries. It was called by several names, including ‘the mark of

the devil' or 'diablo stimata.' The lymphocytoma was called a 'witches teat.' By the twenty first century, the existence of these so called witch marks had become so hidden under a dusty folkloric layer that they are hardly noticed by medical historians. But a mark on the skin was just as likely to be searched for and appear in the records of a witch trial in the past as DNA is in a murder trial today.

Europe went through a series of climatic, economic and social traumas that eventually brought the medieval period to an end and introduced colonialism as a expansionary force. 'The Black Death' [bubonic plague] killed off more than one third of Europe's population in many areas. The arrival of the Little Ice Age heralded a colder climate. Even the prevailing definition of man's relationship with God and church came under attack with the Protestant Reformation. Over time, it became accepted as common knowledge that the devil himself had been let loose and was walking the earth causing great distress. According to witchcraft theories that became established in European thought after 1500, the devil sealed his compact with a witch by giving him or her some mark of identification on the skin- described as being not unlike the brand an owner might place on his cattle. This devil's mark was considered by Christina Larner, a scholar of the Scottish witch trials, in her book *Enemies of God* to be a uniquely European feature of witch beliefs.[4] There is an entire body of literature describing this mark in words but it is rarely depicted. An illustration of the devil carrying a witch off to hell from Olaus Magnus' *Historia de Gentibus Septentrionalibus* of 1555 may show one on a witch's foot.[5] One of the earliest writers to mention the mark was the Calvinist theologian, Lambert Daneau. In *A Dialogue of Witches*, he wrote that there was not a single witch, "upon whom [the devil] doth not set some note or token of his power and prerogative over them." [6] Ludovico Maria Sinistrari, in the "Demoniality" chapter of R. Masters, *Eros and Evil: The Sexual Psychopathology of Witchcraft* writes that judges in witch trials were advised that suspects should be carefully examined- "pull and shave, where occasion shall serve, all the body over, lest haply the mark may lurk under the hair in any place." [7] Sinistrari, an early demonologist, wrote: "The demon imprints on [the witch] some mark, especially on those whose constancy he suspects. That mark, however, is not always of the same shape or figure; sometimes it is the likeness of a hare, sometimes like a toad's foot, sometimes a spider, a puppy, a dormouse. It [can be] imprinted on the most secret parts of the body; with men, under the eyelids or perhaps under the armpits, or on the lips or shoulders, the anus, or elsewhere; with women, it is generally on the breasts or private parts. Now, the stamp which makes these marks is simply the devil's talon." [8] Finding such a mark was considered proof that a suspect was a witch and was in itself sufficient to justify torture or a sentence of death. These European ideas were carried to America during colonization.

Although searching the skin of accused witches for marks was delegated to a committee

of women in Salem Village in 1692, even Cotton Mather commented on these marks: “I add, why should not witch marks be searched for? Divers weighty writers describe the properties, the qualities of those marks. I never saw any of those marks, but it is doubtless not impossible for a surgeon, when he sees them, to say what are magical.”[9] The marks were described as being found on any part of the body. If the mark was not immediately obvious, it was suggested that it be looked for in more intimate hiding places. In *Disquisitionum Magicarum* of 1599, for example, Del Rio suggests that a search of the sexual parts and anus was often in order.[10]

Because a bull’s eye rash often appears at the site of tick attachment, parts of this searching the body ritual continue in the modern day in the form of ‘checking for ticks’ which can be a very intimate examination indeed. It has permeated American popular culture. In the summer of 2007, my car radio often featured Brad Paisley’s serenade: “And I’d like to check you for ticks.... Ohh you never know where one might be.”[11] The folkloric connection between the devil’s mark and the intimate sexual areas often favored by ticks for attachment is often implicit in the epistemology of witchcraft. The witch offers the intimate parts of her body to the devil who then takes full advantage.

At North Berwick in Scotland, witch trial records described the initiation of witches as involving a sort of ceremony where “the devil doth lick them with his tongue in some privy part of their body, before he doth receive them to be his servants, which mark commonly is given them under the hair in some part of their body.” When Agnes Sampson, an accused Scottish witch was shaved, “the devil’s mark was found upon her privities.” In 1658, another Scottish witch, Margaret Taylor, confessed that the devil, “gave her his mark . . . in her secret member.”[12] Dr. Jacques Fontaine wrote in *Des Marques des sorciers et de la réele possession que le diable prend sur le corps des hommes* of 1611, that “writers . . . who say that it is difficult to distinguish devil’s marks from natural blemishes, from a carbuncle, or from impetigo, clearly show that they are not good doctors.” Dr. Fontaine wrote in some detail about how the devil made these marks. “Some say that Satan makes these marks on them with a hot iron and a certain unguent which he applies under the skin of witches. Others say that the devil marks the witches with his finger.”[13]

Peter Ostermann, whose 1629 *Commentarius Juridicus* was a summary of both popular and official opinions at the height of the witch beliefs, wrote that “Not one person could be produced who, having the mark, had lived a blameless life; no one convicted of sorcery had ever been found without the mark. It was the proof of proofs and more infallible than either accusations or confessions.”[14] Even Margaret Murray, whose 1921 work, *Witch Cult in Western Europe* appears to be more fantasy than fact, noted the persistence of historic references to the devil’s mark. She theorized that it was a tattoo that was applied during the

initiation ritual of a witch coven.[15]

Because they were associated with the epistemology of witchcraft, a deliberate search was made for marks on the skin for centuries and people in the past appear to have seen these marks, and their existence was consistently noted in writing in both Europe and America along with a coterie of explanatory theories. Lyme disease should be added as an explanation for the devil's mark and marks found on the skin of those thought to be afflicted by witchcraft. The lymphocytoma, a raised bluish red skin lump, which is found in modern Lyme disease cases in Europe, may be the physical manifestation of the folkloric witch's teat concept—a place where the witch's familiar suckles her blood[like a tick]. This bluish-red lump is usually found on the areas of the body that have low skin temperature like the earlobe, nipples and areolae, the nose, or the scrotum.

In the historical record from the 1692 Salem and other witchcraft trials, many items related to the skin manifestations appear. Not only were accused witches searched for “witch's teats” but there are also numerous descriptions of skin manifestations appearing on the bodies of the afflicted. These ranged from a thin red line across a palm to a mark appearing that was round and resembled a bite mark made by the upper and lower teeth. In an interesting epistemological turn, marks on the skin in early New England are as closely linked to those thought to be afflicted by witchcraft as they are to those accused of doing the afflicting. The afflicted Goodwin children of Boston, for example, developed red streaks on their bodies, similar to the rash from the tick-bite induced co-infection of *Bartonella*. Another rash, on Abigail Williams, was described as being “the exact print, image and colour of an orange made on” a child's leg.[16]

In 1682, Mary Hortado of Berwick, Maine, had markings that looked like “the impressions of the teeth being like a man's teeth” that were plainly seen by many and also developed a set of red blisters that looked like “scalds” from a heat source. These marks would develop and then disappear within a few days. In 1662, the daughter of John Kelley died with a large tawny spot on her cheek. Margaret Rule was observed to have blisters “raised on her skin” which were treated with the “oyl's proper for common burning” and that most of the scalds also went away without scabbing up or scarring.[17] Deodat Lawson, a minister visiting Salem Village during 1692, observed that the afflicted Mary Walcut, “as she stood by the door, was bitten, so that she cried out of her wrist, and looking on it with a candle, we saw apparently the marks of teeth both upper and lower set, on each side of her wrist.” An undesignated number of the afflicted “produced the marks of a small set of teeth.” In proper English tradition, even four-year-old Dorcas Good, an accused witch, was observed to have a “deep red spot, about the bigness of a flea bite” on her finger.[18] In 1685, Jarvis Ring of Salisbury developed “the print of the bite (of a woman)” on the little finger of his right hand.[19] When these witch

marks began to appear in Salem, the witch hunt was on!

In this way, Lyme disease helped create the witch hysteria and one of the darkest periods of our shared history. Lyme disease and other afflictions caused by the “invisible world” of bacteria have plagued mankind throughout the ages. Within five years after 1692, one witch trial judge and twelve jurors had formally apologized for their role in the hunt and within two decades, the Massachusetts government had formally apologized to the families of the accused witches. Within decades, the Salem area would be transformed into open fields and farms by deforestation. The affliction of Lyme disease was well on its way to becoming a distant memory that would only return to haunt us almost three hundred years later in the same geographical landscape as farm fields surrendered to suburbia and tick populations exploded.

References

1. Arno Karlen, *The Biography of a Germ* (New York: Anchor, 2001), 133.
2. See www.lymediseaseassociation.org/PhotoAlbum. Also see history in M.M. Drymon, *Disguised as the Devil: How Lyme disease Created Witches and Changed History* (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Wythe Avenue Press, 2008).
3. Christina Lerner, *Enemies of God*, (Edinburgh: Scotland, UK: John Donald, 2000), 11.
4. Olaus Magnus, *Historia de Gentibus septentrionalibus* (1555).
5. Lambert Deneau, *A Dialogue of witches* (1575).
6. Ludovico Maria Sinistrari, “Demoniality” in Masters, R.E.L. *Eros and Evil: The Sexual*
7. *Psychopathology of Witchcraft* (AMS Press, Reprint edition. 1995).
8. Reginald Scot, *Discovery of Witchcraft* (1584).
9. See Cotton Mather, letter of May. 31, 1692 to John Richards, in Silverman, *The Life and Times of Cotton Mather* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 37.
10. Del Rio, *Disquisitionum Magicarum* (1599).
11. Brad Paisley song “Ticks” lyrics, see www.bradpaisley.com.
12. Christina Lerner, *Witchcraft and Religion: The Politics of Popular Belief* (UK: Blackwell, 1986).

13. Dr. Jacques Fontaine, *Des Marques des sorciers et de la réele possession que le diable prend sur le corps des homes* (1611).
14. Peter Ostermann, *Commentarius Juridicus* (1629).
15. Margaret Alice Murray wrote *The God of the Witches and Witch Cult in Western Europe*. Her works have been routinely ridiculed but she did make the extremely important contribution to the subject of witchcraft in that she was the first to demonstrate that the Christian concept of the devil's physical appearance including having horns, a tail, cloven feet, and holding a pitchfork has roots in pagan fertility gods.
16. R.R. Müllegger, "Clinical aspects and diagnosis of erythema migrans and borrelial lymphocytoma," *ACTA* 10, No 4 (2001).
17. M.M. Drymon, *Disguised as the Devil: How Lyme disease Created Witches and Changed History* (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Wythe Avenue Press, 2008) 239-256.
18. George Lincoln Burr, *Narratives of the New England Witchcraft Cases* (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, 2002) The Godwin children ,99-128, Mary Hortado ,36.
19. Jarvis Ring, "Testimony," *Essex County, Massachusetts Archives, Salem Witchcraft Vol 1: No. 181*.